

# Obituary

## Sydney M Laird, BSc, MD, DPH, FRCP (1911–2001)

The death of Sydney Laird sees the passing of the last of that group of venereologists who distinguished themselves in wartime, who ensured that the specialty had equal status with others with the establishment of the National Health Service, and who over the following 25–30 years gave a well sustained lead to ensure that the specialty coped with the growing demands on its service.

After qualifying in 1934, Sydney Laird filled a series of junior posts over 3 years, including appointments in dermatology and gynaecology, before becoming an assistant VD officer in Liverpool. In 1937 he acquired his DPH from the University of Liverpool, his MD on research into the association of heart and gall bladder disease, and the fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow with venereology as his special subject. Little wonder that he was appointed venereologist in Stoke on Trent and assistant dermatologist at North Staffordshire Royal Infirmary in 1938. In 1939 he visited VD departments in Sweden and Denmark where he found support for his liberal views about the care of the venereally infected.

As a territorial officer in the Royal Army Medical Corps, he was called up in September 1939 as a regimental medical officer. Before long he was posted as command venereologist to Western Command at Preston. While there he published his book *Venereal Diseases*, in 1942 a much needed contribution to public education in wartime. He also trained specialists and assistants to serve in VD departments of military hospitals both at home and abroad. It was at this time that one of us (RSM) first met him.

On demobilisation Sydney Laird was appointed venereologist at Ipswich and Cambridge hospitals. In 1947 he was Watson lecturer at the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons in Glasgow. His subject was syringe transmitted jaundice, which he had been seeking to prevent since 1944. It was about this time that he began to be a popular lecturer and writer. He lectured regularly at Cambridge's Post-graduate Medical School and at the Institute of Urology. He



became editor of the *British Journal of Venereal Diseases* in 1950, an undertaking which was to last 15 years. He greatly enjoyed this commitment although it sometimes demanded 8 hours of his working week. As a member of the WHO's Syphilis Study Commission he visited centres in the United States for 3 months in 1949 and in 1951–2 led a team to Ceylon to establish and develop a modern VD service in that country.

In 1954 he moved to Manchester as senior consultant in the city and adviser to the Manchester Regional Hospital Board. A decade of endless demands on all his skills—as clinician, teacher, researcher, writer, and negotiator—was to follow. His many publications during this period, often involving colleagues, bear witness to his wide range of interests and the need for the specialty to cope with the effects of growing prosperity as well as the advent of the contraceptive pill. He was chairman of the BMA venereologists group in 1956 and 1957 and president of the Medical Society for the Study of Venereal Diseases in 1956–7 and 1957–8. In this post he displayed a welcome innovation at society meetings. He would frequently invite the more reserved members, whose work he knew, to contribute to discussions.

As the result of a life threatening illness in 1965 he sought a less stressful commitment and moved to west Dorset, with his main centre at Bournemouth. Sooner than generally anticipated he

recovered his usual vigour and set about improving the services in his regional board area. Helpful administrators proved hard to come by and it was only the threat of “going public” that brought an adequate response to “a clear case of need.” It was at this time, from 1971, that one of us (RBR) began to work with him and to have the daily privilege of his counsel, advice, and humour, as well as the honour of succeeding him.

Sydney Laird retired in 1975. With his eyesight beginning to fail he returned to the Manchester area to be near his family. Blindness was nearly complete by 1979 but this did not deter him from continuing to “write.” He learned to type and typed the half million words of his two volume autobiography to be published in 1988 and 1991.

Sydney Laird was involved in all aspects of research in VD, from health promotion, epidemiology, prevention and control, as well as the refinements of clinical observations and responses, to new treatments. His writing ability was ever more widely recognised by invitations from editors to provide reviews, editorials, and timely comments. His publications number more than 200.

In addition, he was an enthusiastic rugby fan and knew the game intimately. As a keen philatelist he loaned his superb collection of Olympic stamps to international philately exhibitions. In his later years he was concerned with the world's threat of overpopulation.

For those of us who owe him much and who kept in touch with him over the years, there is no doubt that his most endearing quality was his capacity for making friends. He had a lively mind that never dimmed. Conversation with him was never dull. Above all he had a capacity to recognise and cultivate what he called “the good within,” in colleagues, workmates, and friends.

Sydney's wife, Gwen, also a doctor, survived him by only three weeks. They leave a son, two daughters, and five grandchildren.

**R S Morton**

**R B Roy**